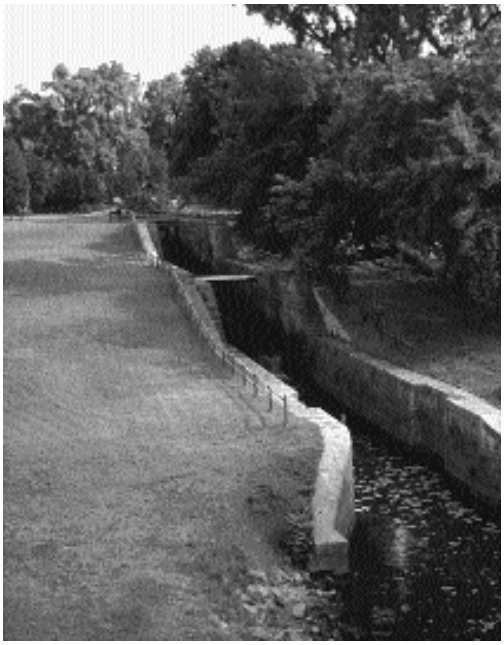
Rory Robinson and Robert Bobel

Historic Preservation Through Canal Trail Development

Paw-Paw Tunnel in the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park.Photo courtesy C&O Canal NHP.

The Towpaths-to-Trails Initiative—a cooperative effort between the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) of the National Park Service and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy to access the recreational potential of historic transportation canal corridors (see "Revitalizing America's Canals," *CRM*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1996)—found that historic preservation advocates often are concerned that the conversion of canals into trails will result in damage to the historic resources. Canal trail use can be a tool that both preserves and enhances these significant resources through the identification, stabilization, and restoration of historic structures; resource-sensitive design and development; and the education of trail users. A good example of this is found in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor where canal trail development has resulted in the historic resources being identified, preserved, and interpreted.



Locks along the Illinois and Michigan Canal. Photo courtesy I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor Commission.

Inventory

A thorough inventory of the resources that remain along a canal corridor is important for two reasons. First, it is imperative to know what remains of the historic canal so that trail development will be sensitive to these remnants. Second, knowledge of associated features can provide opportunities to combine trail development with the preservation of historic structures.

An inventory of structures and sites must encompass more that just the canal right-of-way and below the ground. Individual buildings, mill races that powered industrial developments, neighborhoods and entire towns or cities are often where they are, and what they are, because of the canal. Canals usually followed transportation routes of the past, resulting in archeological resources that predate a canal by tens, hundreds, or even thousands of years. Identification of these resources will ensure protection and prevent inadvertent destruction of an unknown mill site or prehistoric feature. A search of existing information should be followed by a field inventory of the canal by a trained archeologist as in the case of the Delaware & Raritan Canal where archeological investigation preceded all (trail) projects.

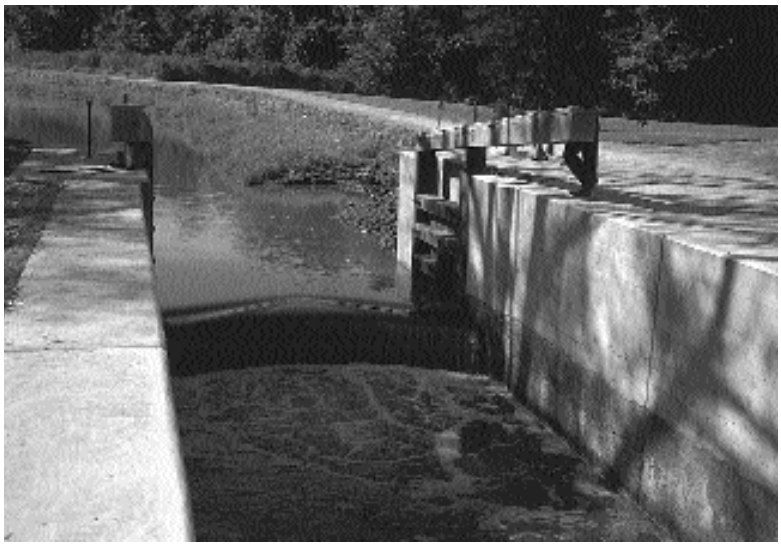
A good inventory casts a canal trail project in the light of the overall heritage of a community or region. Canal trails provide recreation for communities but also an exciting opportunities for residents to return to their historic roots along the banks of their canal.

Integrating Historic Values

The development of a canal trail should not compromise the integrity of historic resources and

Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program

The RTCA program helps communities protect rivers, trails, and greenways on lands outside the federal domain and without federal ownership. By lending the broad skills and high credibility of the National Park Service to local projects, we help other groups achieve their goals. Based on the principle of partnerships, RTCA brings residents, landowners, government agencies, and private organizations together to meet the challenges of conservation.



Restored Lock 38 on the Ohio & Erie Canal in Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Photo by Robert Bobel.

should enhance these resources whenever possible. Trails along canals are compatible with resource preservation often leading to the rehabilitation of canal structures. The simple removal of the overgrowth of trees and vegetation along a canal goes a long way in restoring a historic appearance. Other factors that should be carefully considered when designing and developing a canal trail are trail surface, signage, and the location and type of trail support facilities.

Sign in Barberton, Ohio.Photo by Paul Labovitz.

Nomally, the selection of surface materials for a trail is dependent only upon the proposed uses and costs. For a canal trail, the preservation and enhancement of the historic resource must also be considered. A well-drained, hard-packed dirt surface for hiking only or a crushed stone surface for hiking and biking are both recommended for a historically accurate appearance. If proposed use requires asphalt or concrete surface, coloring or texturing can be used to make the surface less intrusive.

Signage along trails is important for users, but along canal trails signage should complement the historic resource. Directional, mileage, safety, and informational signs should not detract from and can enhance the scene. Trail managers have been very creative in finding ways to provide warnings at approaching road crossings without using the standard highway stop sign at no loss of safety to trail users.

The location and design of trail support facilities should also preserve the historic setting. Parking areas should be removed and/or screened from the canal trail itself. The use of native materials such as wood and stone for development of restrooms, trash receptacles, water fountains, bulletin boards and other support elements will mirror the use of these same materials in the original construction of the canal.

Sensitive design and development will lead to a finished canal trail that preserves and enhances the historic resources and setting.

Preserving and Enhancing Historic Structures

Development of a trail along a canal often leads to the restoration of many original canal structures. Stabilization and restoration of the canal towpath is a part of all canal trail development. Reuse of historic aqueducts and culverts not only results in the continuation of the trail, but also ensures stabilization and rehabilitation of structures that otherwise would be left to deteriorate. Trail development has resulted in the preservation of numerous structures including:

- three aqueducts and the towpath at original design elevation on the 155-mile towpath trail along the Hennepin Canal State Parkway in Illinois;

Towpath trail in the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Interpretation provides support for canal resources. Photo by Paul Labovitz.

Hunt Farm visitor information center on towpath trail in Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Photo by Robert Bobel.

- the Paw Paw Tunnel and numerous aqueducts, culverts, locks and other canal structures along the 184-mile canal trail in the C&O Canal National Historic Park in Maryland.

The preservation and rehabilitation of structures associated with the canal, but not directly related to trail development, is another positive impact of canal trails. Examples include:

- the rehabilitation and use of the River Bend Farm as a visitor center along the Blackstone Canal in Massachusetts;
- the development of the Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum including the restoration of a three-bay drydock, blacksmith/sawmill complex, and general store at the Old Erie Canal State Park in New York.

The recreational opportunities provided through trail development of historic canals has been the driving force behind the historic preservation and restoration described above. Trail use of canals is a powerful preservation tool.

Access + Education = Advocacy, and Support

Increased access to canals through trail development (when combined with education of the users) leads to advocacy and support for preservation and maintenance of these facilities. The simple clearing of a canal corridor for hiking re-awakens the past by providing the opportunity for people to rediscover their roots. Examples of this include the Wabash & Erie Canal in Delphi, Indiana, where development of a canal trail has brought about a (community) spirit of historic preservation and friendliness and along the Old Champlain Canal in New York where trail development has led to increased interest in restoring main street store fronts and the recognition by the community of diverse cultural resources.

Education provides a great opportunity to build support and advocacy for a canal trail and for the preservation of historic resources. Interpretation of the canal, related structures, and the stories preserved along a canal trail is something trail users want. Interpretive signs and wayside exhibits used along the Delaware & Raritan, Illinois and Michigan, C&O, Ohio & Erie, and many other canal trails are ways to educate trail users. Other ways include trail guides and brochures, audio-tapes, guided hikes, school programs, and trailhead exhibits. Imagination and creativity are the major requirements when deciding how to interpret the resource. Trail users are there for recreation so interpretation and educational materials should be informal and fun.

F. A. Ketterson, Cultural Resource Manager with the National Park Service, wrote in an 1990 article entitled, *Interpretation in the National Park System;* "Interpretation is not, of course, the reason for a park's being. But for the vast majority of people, a visit to a park without interpretation would be a less complete thing. Good interpretation contributes mightily to visitor enjoyment and

Recreated sandstone mile marker replaces original milepost along the towpath trail in Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Photo by Robert Bobel.

Ohio & Erie Canal in the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Photo courtesy CUVA NRA.

understanding and, through that understanding, to the preservation of park resources, be they cultural or natural." The access provided through canal trail development, combined with education, results in strong advocacy and support for the preservation of historic resources.

The Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail

The basis of the reconstruction of the towpath of the Ohio & Erie Canal as a multi-use trail was to preserve and rehabilitate the most significant historic resource in Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. The trail's treadway was limited to 8' wide with a foot of grass berm on either side. This minimized the visual impact to the landscape while respecting the 1825 construction width of 10'. Hundreds of trees along the route were removed between the towpath turned trail and the canal prism, allowing 19th-century trail users to get an 18th-century view.

The decision on trail surface was not as straightforward. The width and grade of the towpath made it an obvious choice to be fully accessible. However, to comply with generally accepted criteria for an accessible trail, and to meet the needs of recreational bicyclists, the trail surface needed to be stable, firm and slip resistant. Historically, the surface was compacted soil. An acceptable compromise was a graded, crushed limestone surface. This provided a color and texture that would resemble the original surface while serving the needs of hikers, bicyclists and those in wheelchairs. In areas of more than 2% slope (2' rise in 100' length) or where the trail is open to horses, asphalt was used with a limestone chip and seal top coat, matching the appearance of the limestone screenings elsewhere.

The design of the signage and ancillary facilities along the trail needed to carry the canal theme. Sandstone mileage markers installed recreate the mile markers originally used along the Ohio & Erie Canal. Even the resting benches which are scattered along the trail—obviously not an original element—were designed with the canal in mind. The benches were constructed of timber, stone, and metal, the same three elements used in the construction of the canal's lift locks.

Development of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail allowed for the preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration of a number of historic structures on or along the canal. Lock 38 was restored to its 1907 appearance by removing and replacing deteriorated concrete. Even form marks were faithfully restored through the use of wood forms designed to match the original. Reconstructed timber lock gates were installed to complete the project. The lock is fully operational and demonstrations are given on weekends during the summer and fall.

The house at Lock 38 (sometimes incorrectly called the "Locktenders" House) and the Hunt Farmstead have been rehabilitated as visitor center and visitor contact station respectively. The 1836 Boston Store will open in the fall of 1996 as a canal museum specializing in boatbuilding exhibits. The Station Road Bridge, an 1881 wrought iron bridge over the Cuyahoga River, was restored and now carries pedestrian, bicycle, and equestrian traffic. Numerous other canal-related structures have been restored, rehabilitated, or stabilized for future preservation as a direct result of the development of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail.

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The above article is a summary of one of eight Towpaths-to-Trails "How to" fact sheets. For copies of the fact sheets or Towpaths-to-Trails summary report contact Rory Robinson, c/o Cuyahoga Valley NRA, 15610 Vaughn Rd., Brecksville, OH 44141; 216-657-2950; email at rory_robinson@nps.gov.